

# Part Three

Wednesday, August 20, 2003

## Emotion-filled family reunion for twins

By COURTNEY PEIFER

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

SEOUL -- I now remember what my heart would not forget.

"I'm sorry we were poor," my 87-year-old grandfather told me through his tears. "I've been missing you a lot. I have lived a long life and I have been waiting for you to return."

"We've finally come back," my twin sister, Lindsay, said, her voice breaking.

I sobbed. I had no words to offer as I knelt before him and he clutched my hand. I felt the impact of 25 years without him, not even knowing that I missed him, spill out and I couldn't stop crying.

And Grandfather cried.

LINDSAY AND I landed at Korea's Incheon International Airport after nearly 14 hours of travel, after nearly 25 years away from the land of our birth.

When I walked out of customs, the lights seemed too bright. I held up my sign, orange construction paper that had my Korean and American names written in Korean characters, waiting to be claimed. I heard the shouting first.

I strained to look beyond the roped-off area and saw a group of people jockeying to reach Lindsay and me.

I stared at a woman and asked who she was. It was the first time I had seen my mother in more than 26 years. We looked at each other awkwardly. I was facing a stranger; she was facing the daughter she abandoned. I patted her back uncertainly.

My older sister Jong Sook embraced me and held my hand. I smiled, but could not remember her. I met her husband and her two children, ages 5 and 13.

I hugged a man who looked liked me, assuming it was my brother Jong Pil because he looked too young to be Jong Seong, who is 10 years my senior. Kyun Bo Ra, the 21-year-



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Lindsay and Courtney Peifer, right, arrive at Incheon International Airport, holding signs that bear their Korean names, nearly 25 years after they left.



Meryl Schenker / P-I

Through tears, Lindsay, left, and Courtney Peifer are reunited with their grandfather on Daebu Island, where they were born. As the family elder, it was up to him to give up the two youngest grandchildren for adoption.

old cousin of my brother-in-law, stepped up to interpret. She said it was Jong Seong.

"Where is Jong Pil?" I asked her.

"He could not come because of his busy-ness," she said.

I wondered whether that was a euphemism to explain that he did not want to meet.

Jong Sook invited us to her home in Incheon, explaining that it was small.

"We do not care about that," Lindsay and I both assured her.

At my sister's house, we gathered in a circle on the floor in the living room. Tonight, it would serve as a bedroom for five women -- and my 5-year-old nephew Chae Hyun -- sleeping side by side on floor mats. My brother, brother-in-law and 13-year-old nephew, Chae Gun, would sleep in the office past the kitchen. A small bathroom completed the apartment.

Incheon is a bustling city, but a rooster still crowed at dawn. Even though we had been awake for more than 26 hours, Lindsay and I woke at 4 a.m.

"The sun's almost out," Lindsay whispered. "We can see our first sunrise in Korea."

WE DROVE TO Daebu Island, about two hours south of Incheon, to meet the man who raised me and my four siblings after my father died. At the time, I was nearly 2 and my mother had gone.

My grandfather cried as he expressed his gratitude for my adoptive parents in Minnesota, who had given my sister and me the education and the opportunity that he had wished for us when he had us taken to an orphanage in 1978.

He cried as he gave thanks for living long enough to see his son's daughters return. He cried even as he tried to comfort me, telling me, "Don't cry. Don't cry."

Even through my tears, Grandfather could see how years of love in the United States had molded me, had made my heart warm and my smile bright.

Lindsay and I showed him pictures of our childhood: Scenes at a sandbox surrounded by grass; of Raggedy Ann and Alice in Wonderland Halloween costumes (straight black bangs escaping from a yellow wig); of proudly holding up a U.S. flag on the day we became citizens.

I had been nervous to see Grandfather's reaction. I am no longer a Korean citizen and can no longer speak the language. I am not married, a fact that agitated my aunts who had gathered to meet us in Daebu.

What alarmed Grandfather, however, was that Lindsay and I live half a country apart, in Minneapolis and in Seattle.

"But you were raised together?" he implored through an interpreter. "You had the same parents?"

"Yes, yes," we reassured him. "We were raised together in Minnesota."

He smiled with relief. "I am proud of you," he said.

What gift, what honor could be greater than those words?

In a two-year span, Grandfather watched his wife die. Their oldest son, my father, suffered the ravages of a fatal snakebite. He tried to pick up the pieces when his son's wife ran away, leaving him with five children. He saw his two-room house bear the burden of those five children, and later, his youngest son and his wife and their five children. As the family elder, he bore the responsibility of giving up the two youngest grandchildren because he could not afford to keep us and wanted something more for us than he could offer.

Grandfather no longer had to wonder; he had made the right choice.

**THE KIM FAMILY'S** fortunes had changed in the past 25 years.

At one point, the family owned much of the land surrounding Grandfather's house on Daebu Island, including the mountain behind the house.

But parcel after parcel had been sold through the years, and what land remains in the family, my oldest uncle has toiled into prosperity.

Uncle Hyeon Bae and his wife have built a seven-bedroom house, vast and ornate.

Koreans traditionally gather on the floor, eating on low tables and sleeping on mats. But Uncle has included Western-style beds in the upstairs bedrooms.

Uncle has rows and rows of grapevines, a yard filled with butterflies and corn taller than me. He proudly points out his plum tree, which I climb after he beckons me to gather some fruit.

My father's three siblings led Lindsay and me along a gravel road, passing rice paddies, green like bursting buds of spring. We walked to a narrow path, potholed and muddy, that leads to my grandfather's house, the house in which I was born and in which my father died.



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Lee Soon Nam, Courtney and Lindsay's mother, abandoned the family when the twins were 2 years old. Here she sits in Grandfather's house, her former home. After she left, Grandfather cared for her five children, and was forced to give up two for adoption.

The yard is overgrown with melon vines and the metal roof seems to be leaning in. My aunt shows us a small dirt patch along the side where Lindsay and I -- who are called Soon and Sun here -- used to play.

The house is bare. This small expanse is little more than a rectangle bisected with one area for a kitchen and the other for meeting and sleeping. There is no furniture, no evidence that time has passed here. Even the black-and-white photographs on the wall -- combined in one frame -- are 30 years old. This is where the past and the present collide.

This room is exactly how I remember it. It is small and dark and safe. This is the place of my clearest memories, to where I returned in my dreams as a child.

We went back to my uncle's house, where my grandfather walks each day for his meals.

Korean families often eat in shifts, so Lindsay and I ate with Grandfather as many of the extended family, about 30 of whom had gathered to meet us, chatted on the outskirts of the room.



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It was a banquet. Barbequed octopus, bulgogi, chop chae, crab and squid soup, radishes, kimchi and other side dishes.

Courtney compares hands with her brother, Jong Seong, as they wait for a taxi in the hotel lobby. Jong Seong, the oldest child, is the family historian.

Halfway through the meal, I noticed Grandfather's eyes start tearing. And I realized the day was drawing to a close.

Brushing his eyes with his handkerchief, he looked away and said, "I would like to see you again before you leave Korea."

"When can we come back?" I asked.

"Tomorrow," he said no longer able to prevent his tears from spilling over.

That night, back in Seoul, I thought about what my grandfather gave up and what he received in his life.

He has lost most of his teeth and eats his rice in a bowl of hot water. He chuckles softly as he watches the room fill up with his sons and daughters and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. He has lost much of his hearing and speaks softly but must endure shouting to hear. He has lived long enough to see his son's daughters return. He has worn away his joints from a lifetime of fishing and walks with two wooden canes. He has a heart so full and deep that he can move a room to tears.

**MY 38-YEAR-OLD** brother, Jong Seong, is stoic and patient while my sister Jong Sook, 31, and her husband, Junho, tell story after animated story. But it is Jong Seong who is the family historian, the keeper of the memories.

"I remember you were in a car accident," he said quickly.



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Worn out after a long day, Courtney, brother Jong Seong and 13-year-old nephew Chae Gun, look up at the television screens in a restaurant in Seoul.

Jong Sook suddenly remembers, too, and finishes the story: Lindsay and I were about 2 years old and were walking with her and Mother to the market.

"We were crossing the street and a dump truck hit you," she said. "You were rushed to a hospital and had an operation. We were all really worried about you."

"Yes, you had surgery on your head," Jong Seong added.

I have often wondered about those scars above the nape of my neck, which Mom would cover up with lopsided ponytails in my childhood to prevent them from showing. I must have fallen, I imagined, as I traced the smooth patch with my fingers.

I wasn't the only one with questions.

"I was always wondering where you were," my 34-year-old brother Jong Pil said when Lindsay and I later met him and Jong Seong for lunch in Seoul. "Whenever I looked at (pictures of) you, I wondered."

"Do you remember the day we left?" I asked.

"No," Jong Pil said. "We just came home from school and you weren't there."

"How about Mother?" I asked. "What did she tell you before she left?"

"She didn't say anything," Jong Seong said. "We went to school and we came back and she was gone."

The weight of it hit me. I had gained so much; my siblings, who work 12-hour days, six days a week, had lost so much. And it explained why Jong Pil had not been at Incheon International Airport when Lindsay and I returned to Korea; he is seldom where Soon Nam, my birth mother, is.

**HERE IS THE TRUTH:** I never wanted to meet my birth mother.

I did not long for her, did not hope for her or carry secret wishes about her. I have a mother in Minnesota and she is the only one I need.

Soon Nam was the mother I did not want, the one who had



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The Kim family gathers to welcome home Jong Sun and Jong Soon, Courtney, left, and Lindsay, right, at their uncle's home in Daebu.



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After seeing Courtney with a French braid, her sister Jong Sook, 31, asked Courtney to braid her hair too at Jong Sook's apartment in Incheon.

not wanted me. Her abandonment meant I was given a different life so I had no reason to be angry with her -- until I met my brothers.

What does it do to children to watch their father's skin turn yellow in death? What happens when a year later, the boys, ages 12 and 8, watch their grandmother die in the same two-room house, a house still filled with mourning? And then, amid that anguish, their mother leaves them without a word?

And how long did they search and call out for their baby sisters -- whom they carried on their backs, whom they tried to protect as surrogate parents for a year -- when the toddlers were taken to the orphanage while they were at school?

As Jong Seong and Jong Pil told me these stories, I mourned their lost childhoods, crying out for the 25 years I have tried not to cry.

"I'm not angry," Lindsay said. "I'm just uncomfortable around her."

"Not me," I said. "I'm angry and I'm going to be fine with that."

I'm angry that Soon Nam left my brothers motherless. I'm angry that they carry the scars of her choices. I'm angry that she left without a word and came back five years later without an apology, without an explanation, without contrition.

When I confessed my anger to Jong Seong, his light brown eyes widened with concern.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because she abandoned you and Jong Pil and Jong Sook and Lindsay and me. Because I blame her for us being split up," I said, partly in English and partly in the Korean I had been acquiring.

"Ah," he said, his face relaxing with clarity as he embraced me.

"How do you feel?" I asked him.

After a pause, he said in English, "I don't know. I don't know."

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## Thoughts and musings on finding family, roots

By LINDSAY PEIFER  
SPECIAL TO THE POST-INTELLIGENCER

DAEBU ISLAND, South Korea -- I held the hand of my 87-year-old grandfather today.

It is darkly tanned, weathered and is roughly the size as my own. In this hand, I have a physical link to the father I once had, to the house I once lived in, to the life I once owned.

Grandfather has a beautiful smile despite the few teeth still present in it.

He cannot hear very well but his eyes are sharp and he understands the traditional Korean bow, a bow Courtney and I have learned only hours earlier in front of our father's ashes.

At this moment I am unsure how long to keep my head on the floor. How long is appropriate to show respect for a man who tried to raise us after our father's death, after our mother's disappearance?

We are surrounded by aunts, uncles, cousins and their children but all our attention is on the source of this circle, this grandfather seated in front of us. He says he wants to hold our hands.

"I have been missing you a lot," he says. "I am sorry we were poor, we did not have very much money. I have lived a long life, a good life, and I have lived long enough to see you come back, which makes me want to live longer."

"We have finally come back," I say.

### Common links

Jong Seong and Jong Pil hold our hands as we walk and see the sights of Seoul.

Jong Seong is quiet and thoughtful, making his sudden bursts of silliness all the funnier. He is the "keeper of the memories," as Courtney says. Courtney, too, is the historian in our family. She often retells memories I have long forgotten.

Jong Pil is expressive and animated but there are moments that he is so serious that I wonder what sad thoughts he is mulling over. In him, I see myself. Often I am transparent, experiencing the event in front of me with extreme emotion. But, when I am thinking, a cloudy darkness takes over my face, often making me appear angry even when I am not.

### Picky eaters unite

In America, my being a vegetarian is a luxury that I have chosen. It is often a nuisance for others because I am so picky.

I worried about this before coming to Korea, knowing that we would be eating in people's homes. The day after we arrived, Jong Seong said he, too, was a vegetarian.

He says it was because we had no money when we were young.

Everyone laughs.

### Meet the parents

Jong Seong watches Court's expression as she talks to Mom on the phone.

When we make him talk to Mom, he protests, saying that he doesn't speak English -- a fact that didn't stop him from making me talk to countless people over the phone in the Korean I don't speak.

We shout: "Just say hi, just say hi."

Mom asks him if he is enjoying our visit. Court translates it into one word -- showing our routine in communication -- "Happy?" she says.

"Yes, very happy," he tells Mom.

We call Dad at work. We talk about the noodles and the land. He has been forwarding our e-mails to relatives at home, and he relays their love to us.

Someday, I hope to come again with Mom and Dad. In the meantime, we continue to communicate any way we can, bridging countries, families and lives through stories, a few tears and lots of laughter that encircles us all.

### Beautiful moments

Family. It is the root of all of us. It is our foundation. Yet, where is the line drawn?

In my youth, my family consisted of Mom, Dad, Ashley and Courtney in a house by a Minnesota lake.

As an adult, the line extended outward as our friends become our families.

Now, here is another family half a world away. How do they fit? How does one "keep in touch" with someone that doesn't read or write or speak the same tongue?

As we drive away, I long for home and the silence of a morning spent in my rocking chair on my porch drinking tea.

And yet, as I watch as my nephew climb on my lap and take my pen to draw, I return to the present and the beauty of the luck that exists in every moment. When he is done, he quietly kisses my arm and crawls to the seat in front of me to jump around between Courtney, my cousin Bryan, and his mom. This two minutes of drawing is the only time he is quiet the whole ride home.

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### With one phone call -- lives forever altered

By COURTNEY PEIFER  
SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

When I hung up the phone with Commissioner Elliott Kim, it was 2:45 a.m., 4:45 a.m. in Minnesota where my twin sister, Lindsay, and my parents live. I started pacing.

The search for my Korean family had taken years, what was a few more hours? It's going to be a shock so they might as well hear it on a good night's sleep.

Lindsay's a high school teacher and even though it's summer recess, I knew she would be awake early. I gave her until 7 a.m.

"Are you sure they found the right people?" Lindsay asked.

"I don't know," I said, "apparently Lieutenant Kwon looked them up on the Police Identification List and found them through our sister's in-laws. He's already spoken with our sister. Apparently she's excited to meet us. She gave Lieutenant Kwon her cell phone number and now I have it."

"Does she speak English?" Lindsay asked. "Uh, I don't know," I said. Giddy with sleep-deprivation and excitement, I next called Mom and Dad.

"Outstanding!" Dad said, when I told him. I could just see his big grin. "Tell your mother."

"I'm nervous for my girls," Mom said after hearing the details. "I'm excited for you, but I'm nervous for my girls. I know you'll be fine. If anyone can do this and be fine, it's you two."

I could hear Dad in the background. "When you come back, everything here will still be the same."

I knew what Dad meant and I was glad that he knew. When I came back from Korea, I'd be coming home. My family -- my real family in the United States -- would still be there, would still love me, would still be home.

But at the same time, things were suddenly altered. And as a testament of family, perhaps, this discovery affected all of us -- except for Dad, who was as even-keeled as ever.

Mom began having dreams that Lindsay and I went to Korea and didn't come back.

Lindsay flew to Seattle so we could call our sister in Korea and try to process something so large, nebulous and unexpected that we felt we could only tackle the task together.

I walked around in a daze, trying to hug everyone who came near me. I felt that the discovery was so significant that surely everyone could see it on my face.

But I was quickly checked by reality. When Lindsay and I contacted Ashley, our sister in Glendale, Ariz., fear overflowed.

Ashley, who is a year older than us and is a creative director at a hair salon, was adopted two years before Lindsay and me. She had been left on a doorstep in South Korea and doctors guessed an approximate age and birth date according to her teeth and a so-called blue spot, a birthmark that looks like a bruise on the lower back that all Koreans and some other ethnic groups are born with. Because the mark fades within a few years, it can help pinpoint age.

Ashley has never wanted to go back to Korea. "What would I go back to?" she asked when we called to tell her that our family had been found.

Ashley wept. She wept for her lost past, over fears that our newly found siblings might squeeze her out of our lives, for our sisterhood weakened by years and miles.

Ashley flew here, and three sisters were reunited. I hadn't seen her in more than a year and hadn't had much time with her since before she got married three years ago.

And over the course of several days, we remembered each other and the beauty of the human heart, boundless and limitless.

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## Short Takes: Rules of the road

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER STAFF

Here are the rules in Seoul: Pedestrians must avoid cars and motorcycles whether the vehicles are driving on the road, on the sidewalk or in the crosswalk. The driver's obligation to the pedestrian: They must take any pedestrians they hit -- though it is the pedestrian's responsibility to avoid being hit -- to the hospital.

The favorite gift: American gum.

"The flavor lasts so long," my brother-in-law, Junho, marveled. "Very good."

In five days, we chewed through seven packs -- from sugar-free lemonade bubble gum to peppermint Orbit.

The most appalling thing I brought: Chinese-made shoes.

My brother, a shoe designer, checked my shoe size so my relatives could surprise us with traditional Korean shoes. But my brother also found a tag that read: "Made in China."

He solved the problem, however. When I wasn't looking, he tore the tags out.

-- Courtney Peifer